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## **Scottish Literature at Play**

**Alan Riach (Friday 30 September 2016)**

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and humour may be a matter of personal taste as well but there are evidently people who have a facility to write in ways that make readers happy, and sometimes even laugh out loud. Of course, there are different kinds of humour and comedy can serve more than one political purpose. To generalise: there are two main kinds of comic writing, overlapping but different: celebration and satire. In celebrative writing, the purpose is to enact and participate in something joyful; in satiric writing, the purpose is to share a critique. When the political world seems to have gone beyond satire (you couldn't make it up) and little enough seems worth celebrating, it's worth reminding ourselves what such work can do, a perennial refreshment. Satire can be wildly funny and celebration can be deadly serious, and the worst of it can be sanctimonious, but there are great writers – and great Scottish writers – who have worked throughout these areas.

Internationally, the comic writers that spring to my mind are pre-eminently Irish and North American: Oscar Wilde, Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, HL Mencken, SJ Perelman, the Canadians Stephen Leacock and Tom Lehrer, the noir crime genre writers Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, and their modern successors, Donald Westlake, Richard Stark and Janet Ivanovich. Consider Chandler: "She had a face like a bucket of mud." Or: "He was as noiseless as a finger in a glove." Or: "She had a mouth like wilted lettuce." As Marshall Walker puts it in his book, *Comrades and Vexations* (2013): "If the Irish invented the wisecrack, the Americans polished it."

The Americans' comic exuberance – especially Twain's – has a firm foundation in social satire. Healthily derisive laughter is in short supply these days. The utterly serious condemnation of racism in *Huckleberry Finn* is complemented by that novel's wonderful and sustained good humour and pathos. In his journalistic writings about his travels in the world, such as *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain takes the idea of Voltaire's *Candide* and extends it: the wandering, wondering innocent encounters the wicked ways of the world and optimistically, naively, recounts his experiences. This is a plot-device Iain Banks puts to brilliant use in his novel *Whit*.

All the work of the American writers of the 1920s and later, like Twain's, is underpinned by a social and moral sensibility, a sense of how society could be better and how people should behave to each other. It is thoroughly engaged by people living together in society in ways that seem foreign to many post-World War II European writers. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is funny, but it's funny in the face of cosmic emptiness, not teeming social presences.

Yet the Irish writers are full of comedy: from James Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Beckett through to Roddy Doyle and others. With Joyce one is always aware that the comedy serves the purpose of a serious affirmation, social, humanly vulnerable, resilient, buoyant, endlessly exfoliating, deeply pleasing. With O'Brien, for all the sheer hilarity at times, there is also a deadly edge, an utterly inviting abyss beneath or just beside the exuberance. The verbal display and wit of these writers is characterised by social engagement but it also works in the pathos of a humanity lost in a Godless cosmos. Even the title of Doyle's famous novel *The Commitments* indicates the conflicting priorities of common human pleasure in music-making as against the prioritisation of commercialism in its exploitation.

What Scottish writers can we consider in this constellation?

Pre-eminently, there are Thomas Urquhart, Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, Burns and Walter Scott. Neil Munro, in three long-running series of short stories, created the memorable comic characters Para Handy, the sly, gentle but tenacious Highland captain of the ship, the "Vital Spark" and her crew, the long-suffering engineer Dan MacPhail, the infinitely oblique and patient first mate Dougie and the irrepressible cabin boy Sunny Jim; the laconic raconteur Erchie; and the sympathetic commercial traveller longing for domestic comfort, Jimmy Swan (a self-evidently Joycean character). MacDiarmid, in prose sketches like "The Last Great Burns Discovery" and "The Waterside" and in poems like "Old Wife in High Spirits" and "The Ross-Shire Hills" is very funny indeed. Compton Mackenzie's novel *Whisky Galore!* is a tour-de-force and Eric Linklater, in novels like *Magnus Merriman*, *Juan in America*, *Juan in China*, *Laxdale Hall* or *The Merry Muse*, keeps an irrepressible sense of humour scalpel-sharp and hedgehog-bristly. The theme is resumed in James Robertson's new novel, *To Be Continued...* (one of whose central characters is a clever, well-informed, and highly articulate toad). Muriel Spark's writing can be as funny as it is deadly.

George MacDonald Fraser, in *The General Danced at Dawn* (1970) and the other stories about Private MacAuslin ("the dirtiest soldier in the world"), MacAuslin in the Rough

(1974) and *The Sheikh and the Dustbin* (1988) creates sympathetic, credible characters whose escapades prompt chortles, chuckles and even loud laughter. Fraser's better-known *Flashman* series (1969-2005) cover the years in the fictional life of their "hero" from 1839 to 1894; he makes a final appearance in *Mr American* (1980), which is set immediately before the First World War. *Flashman* is last seen in a carriage making for Buckingham Palace, where he intends to relieve himself, as his bladder is not as good as it used to be. He will not be rushed, however, and is still shrewdly perceptive of the world around him, and flourishing, despite time's encroachments. The novels satirically recreate the Victorian world and the British Empire, locations ranging from India and Afghanistan to Africa, the United States and South America, but as the series progresses, the fortunes of British identity in the last three decades of the twentieth century, the period in which the novels were written, affect the tone of humour, the portrayal of cowardice, hypocrisy, bullying and swagger, the futile and profligate waste of life dictated by imperial power, and the war-mongering of London governments. The first sentence of *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975) gives a good idea of the humour at work: "They don't often invite me to Balmoral nowadays, which is a blessing: those damned tartan carpets always put me off my food, to say nothing of the endless pictures of German royalty and that unspeakable statue of the Prince Consort standing knock-kneed in a kilt."

Iain Crichton Smith's *Murdo* stories (first collected in 1981) and the story "Napoleon and I" are funny indeed but there is also a dark threnody of seriousness, humour built upon fragility, vulnerability and frailty. Norman MacCaig is one of the funniest poets ever and Edwin Morgan combines celebration and festivity in a poem like "Trio" and in concrete poems of visual puns, like the "Siesta of a Hungarian Snake" or the "Forgetful Duck". Iain Banks is wild in the macabre appetite of his debut novel *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and *Espedair Street* (1987) is buoyant with humour, while *The Crow Road* (1992) begins with one of the funniest lines in fiction, which is nonetheless, in its own style, another way of saying what Robert Louis Stevenson says in *Kidnapped*, maybe the greatest opening line of any novel: "I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house." Banks's opening line in *The Crow Road* says the same thing but is less poignant and much faster: "It was the day my grandmother exploded."

Austere material conditions, the hardship of poverty and deprivation, can itself generate a kind of dark humour. When Marx called religion the opium of the people he was

alerting us to the way in which distractions from material reality can make us dozy about how things really are. Today, there's far more opium everywhere. Humour – like pleasure – can serve any political purpose. But it can, and in Scottish literature, frequently does, aid and abet a serious argument. It is not often merely trivial or dispensable. It is rather that trivia become valuable, humour and pleasure can be savoured in every circumstance – from the mundane, daily routine to the sublime, exceptional, reified moment, from the physical facts of human creaturality to moments of spiritual elation, from crudity to sensuality, as in Thomas Urquhart's version of Rabelais or Sydney Goodsir Smith's great sequence of love poems, *Under the Eildon Tree* (1948) or his verbally crazed novel, *Carotid Cornucopius* (1964). Satiric, reductive humour, black humour, is so frequently found in Scottish literature that it seems unnecessary even to start listing. The great Scottish historian, Angus Calder, reminded us, in his book *Russia Discovered* (1976), how fantastically comic a writer Dostoevsky was. As William Blake puts it, all poets are of the Devil's party. Yet there's also a regenerating humour that runs right through Scottish literature, from Columba to Henryson to Duncan Ban MacIntyre and Burns, to any number of our contemporaries, that MacDairmid sums up like this: "I never set een on a lad or a lass / But I wonder gin he or she / Wi' a word or a deed'll suddenly dae / An impossibility." That's celebration's core.

Even at its most serious, all art is play. In literature, language is always at play, in some sense, even in the most serious work. When language becomes exclusively serious, as in some church sermons or Burns supper speeches, it loses all interest in play, and dies. Bertolt Brecht was once asked, "Are you in earnest? Are you a serious artist?" and he replied that no, he was never in earnest. He was always playing, just trying things out. All the arts – painting, sculpture, music of any kind, from lullabies to Schoenberg quartets – are playing. Even the most classical forms, sonnet, sonata, formal dance, involve movement. And in language, all writers are at play, especially poets.

Black humour is a kind of resilience but the general delight literature and the arts give us, and the real threat they pose to authority, comes about because every time we engage with them, we open up a silent space for contemplation where we do not know what will happen next. Art is a continually changing defiance of the dictatorial power of predestination. Politicians might think about this: the only diplomacy that really works is cultural diplomacy.

One of the most famous utterances of Sir William Thompson, Lord Kelvin (1824-1907), was this: "When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in

numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge of it is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced it to the stage of science.”

This is wrong. All the arts refute it. Every work of art, especially the greatest works, are acts of intuition and intervention, cutting across history and changing it permanently. Things are not as they were. Numbers are never enough.

Weaponry and arms dealers thrive on numbers and wars come and go in the world. But the world is made better not because of them but because of Shakespeare, Beethoven, Picasso and their company: always free, but not directionless; and at their most serious, always at play.

[Off-set in box:]

**Walter Scott’s A Legend of Montrose (1819) contains one of the great comic characters, Dugald Dalgetty, a hardened mercenary soldier leading an expedition into enemy territory in one of the novel’s sub-plots. Self-preservation is his necessary priority; he has his own integrity. His appetite and sense of the value of comfort are essential parts of his character: he’s clearly an ancestor of Flashman. Every time he comes onto the page, you smile: he’s one of the funniest, toughest, most enjoyable literary creations in fiction. In Chapter 2, on first riding up to a possibly hostile company of mounted soldiers, Dalgetty holds still and they look at each other warily:**

**When they had stood at gaze for about a minute, the younger gentleman gave the challenge which was then common in the mouth of all strangers who met in such circumstances – “For whom are you?”**

**“Tell me first,” answered the soldier, “for whom are you? – the strongest party should speak first.”**

**“We are for God and King Charles,” answered the first speaker. – “Now tell your faction, you know ours.”**

**“I am for God and my standard,” answered the single horseman.**

**“And for which standard?” replied the chief of the other party – “Cavalier or Roundhead, King or Convention?”**

**“By my troth, sir,” answered the soldier, “I would be loath to reply to you with an untruth, as a thing unbecoming a cavalier of fortune and a soldier. But to answer your query with beseeming veracity, it is necessary I should myself have resolved to whilk of the present divisions of the kingdom I shall ultimately adhere, being a matter whereon my mind is not as yet precisely ascertained.”**

**In other words, but marvellously indirectly, “I’ll tell you what side I’m on after I’ve fought on the winning side, and won.” He finally introduces himself: “[M]y name is Dalgetty – Dugald Dalgetty, Ritt-master Dugald Dalgetty of Drumthwacket, at your honourable service to command. It is a name you may have seen in Gallo Belgicus, the Swedish Intelligencer, or, if you read High Dutch, in the Fleigenden Mercouer of Leipsic...a cavalier of fortune.” Later, in Chapter 6, after spending the night with his new acquaintances in a castle, Lord Menteith addresses him again:**

**“Captain Dalgetty,” said Lord Menteith, “the time is come that we must part, or become comrades in service.”**

**“Not before breakfast, I hope?”**